

THE MEXICAN CELEBRATION OF *DÍAS DE LOS MUERTOS*

In Mexico, *Días de los Muertos*, the Days of the Dead, is a family-centered celebration rooted in the belief that, beginning on October 31st and continuing through November 2nd, the spirits of the dead visit the living. Families, primarily those of the rural Indian communities, spend these days in communion with departed friends and relatives sharing food, music and companionship.

At the center of *Días de los Muertos* observances are the *ofrendas* that families erect in the home and/or over graves. Offerings of food, drink, candles, flowers and the personal mementos of the dead are placed on the altars for the returning souls to enjoy. One day, October 31st, or November 1st, is set aside to honor the *angelitos* (souls of children); and November 2nd is dedicated to adult souls. Urban *mestizos* (those of mixed race) generally do not participate in the traditional rural indigenous observances, but often attend mass and bring flowers to family gravesites during these days.

When the evangelizing Spanish friars arrived in Mesoamerica (middle America) in the 16th century, they found the native peoples participating in a complex cycle of rituals that included long-term festivals honoring the dead. The Spanish introduced their own Christian feasts of the dead: All Saints' Day of November 1st which recognizes canonized and unknown saints, and All Souls' Days of November 2nd, a day of prayer for departed Christians believed to be in purgatory. Realizing the importance the ancient feasts held for Mesoamericans and that conversion would not eradicate these traditions, the friars allowed the native death rituals and beliefs to be expanded and perpetuated through the annual feasts of All Saints' and All Souls' Days. To this day the celebration demonstrates Christian-European and indigenous influences.

The communal celebration of *Días de los Muertos* became part of U.S. *barrio* existence in the early 1970s as a product of the Chicano Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, which spurred Chicanos to reclaim their Mexican cultural heritage. The installation of *ofrendas* in public spaces became an annual practice, and through which, Chicanos acknowledged their Mexican ancestry and expressed the vitality of their bi-cultural communities.